

Opening Prayer

Lord, inspire us to hear your word and to meditate upon them day and night. Give us real understanding of what we need, that we may put its precepts into practice by the power of your love. Amen.

Under Siege

Christians the world over are under attack.

In May of this year, two pastors were found guilty of “utilizing a cult to undermine law enforcement” and were imprisoned for leading a small group in the singing of hymns in a rural factory in China.

In September, seven Christian churches in the country of Tanzania were doused in gasoline and burnt to the ground.

In October, scores of Syrian Christians were executed for their faith.

And then, this November, just days ago, right here in America, Starbucks released a paper cup design without any Christmas decorations on it. Not. A. Single. One.

大

If we were playing a game of “one of these is not like the others”, I imagine that most of us could guess which of these events does not go with the rest. If you’re having trouble, here’s a hint: it’s the one involving coffee cups.

And yet, and yet, it is this event involving coffee cups that has roused the outrage of millions, consumed the TV news cycle, and filled up social media feeds for several weeks now.

“Starbucks removed Christmas from their cups because they hate Jesus.” quipped one self-proclaimed evangelical “social media personality.” Other pundits were quick to lift up Starbucks’ cup design as the first shot across the bow in the annual “War on Christmas.” On the other side of the aisle, pundits tried their best to shout down the whole debacle as “inane” and “misguided”. Back and forth the arguments went, and back and forth they are still going.

大

Isn't it amazing how some things never change?

大

In today's reading from the Gospel of John we come across another argument, an argument between Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judaea, and the Chief Priests of the Jewish Temple.

At the time, it was common practice to have those sentenced to crucifixion carry signs displaying their crime. Following this custom, Pilate had an inscription written in three languages – Hebrew, Latin, and Greek – and had this inscription attached to the cross on which Jesus was crucified. The inscription read “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”

The Chief Priests, who had rejected Jesus' authority throughout the course of his ministry, of course took issue with the inscription and insisted that Pilate change it to instead read: "*This man said*, I am King of the Jews."

Rather than giving in to the Chief Priests' demands as he had up until this point John's gospel, Pilate takes this opportunity to double down. He declares – and I can only imagine he said this with his nose raised high in the air – "What I have written, I have written."

六

So here's the score: we have here two teams who are supposedly locked in debate over Jesus' identity. It turns out, however, that neither of these teams is particularly interested in who Jesus *actually* said that he was or who Jesus *actually* showed himself to be in the course of his ministry.

Pilate's motives were mixed. First and foremost, he wanted to send a message to any Jews thinking about starting a rebellion against him and the Roman government he represented. What message is more intimidating than the one essentially saying, "Jews, here's your king. I just crucified him." Secondly, on a personal level, Pilate was widely known to be both stubborn and to have a horrible temper. No doubt both of those personal flaws came into play in this interaction. That is to say, part of his reason for leaving the inscription was simply to spite the Jewish leaders.

The motives of the Chief Priests were likewise mixed. For both religious reasons and for the sake of their own authority, they wanted to change the inscription on the cross to read "*This man said*, I am King of the Jews." This

small change would make it perfectly clear to all that read it that Jesus was being executed for falsely claiming to be king.

大

To be sure, both sides of this debate had their reasons, but their reasons had little to do with their concern about who Jesus actually was.

大

Then, 2000 years later, enter Starbucks, FoxNews, MSNBC, and certain self-promoting evangelical social media personalities.

Here's the score: we have two teams locked in debate over the identity of Christmas. It turns out, however, that neither of these teams is interested in the guy who's birthday Christmas is meant to celebrate. They do not care who Jesus actually said that he was or who Jesus actually showed himself to be in the course of their ministry.

Their motives are much less mixed than those of either Pilate or the Chief Priests. The coffee company, the television stations, and the individuals at the center of this brouhaha want two things and two things only: they want our attention and they want our money. Their motives for stoking the flames of this fire, their reasons for entering into this debate at all, have little to do with their concern about who Jesus actually was.

大

Were these teams interested in the actual Jesus of Nazareth whose birth Christmas commemorates, you know...

the long-haired homeless, middle eastern, nonviolent revolutionary who was conceived out of wedlock, born to refugee parents, and who, in adulthood, hung around with lepers, hookers, and crooks; cared for the poorest of the poor; and walked around preaching an anti-wealth message that locates humanity's ultimate power not in the breadth of our political influence but in the depth our compassion towards one another.

Were either of these teams interested in THAT Jesus of Nazareth, my guess is that the design on paper cup meant to hold overpriced lattes would all of a sudden be a non-issue.

These same commentators might instead be focusing their attention on issues that might constitute a *real* war on Christmas – at least a war on those things Jesus actually concerned himself with:

Like the fact that there are Christians actually suffering persecution in other countries,

or fact there are 15 million children in our country who actually go to bed hungry because they don't have adequate access to food,

or the fact that fastest growing segment of the homeless population is actually and once again veterans thanks to the war in Iraq,

or the fact that in Syria right now there are actually four and half million men, women, and children trying to escape their country's borders so that they simply have a better shot at survival.

These issues are big. Their solutions are complex. But to follow the actual Jesus, the Jesus whose birth we celebrate at Christmas, is to follow him into the darkness, because that is where the light is most needed.

May we keep our eyes on *this* Jesus, the *actual* Jesus, both throughout this holiday season and always.

Amen.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Gracious God, as we come to the end of our time together we thank you for all that has been accomplished here today, for a quiet moment to gather and express our gratitude for the abundance in our lives. May our meditations serve as a catalyst to move us forward and cause us to grow in all areas of our lives. May we leave here seeking to follow Jesus in creating an ever more just and loving world. This we pray in the name of Love incarnate. Amen.